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ABSTRACT

This paper considers educational technology in the light of both rationalist and existentialist theory, arguing that the predominance of rationalism in educational technology may be a dangerous tendency. Existentialist theory is first considered as a way--albeit with limitations--to begin examining educational technology from an ethical standpoint. It is argued that to the extent that educational technology seeks a fully rational existence rather than a full existence, it is morally indefensible. It is suggested that educational technology needs to be examined as a moral issue, and a statement of ethics needs to be developed which: (1) seeks to understand the full implications--negative, positive and otherwise--of educational technology; (2) seeks less to control learning than to allow it; and (3) seeks learning in all aspects, i.e., mental, physical, and spiritual. (7 references) (EW)

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Title:

SYMPOSIUM: **Technological Equity: Issues in Ethics & Theory**

Paper #4 **Educational Technology: A Moral Issue**

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Educational Technology, A Moral Issue

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The roots of rationalism in educational technology have been found in Greek philosophy, in the development of science, and in general technology (Saettler, 1968; Nichols, 1987). Today, we find rationalism in our belief, for instance, in the "Development of rationally sound instructional procedures" (Gagne`, 1987, p. 5). What follows contrasts the rationalism of educational technology with a version of Existential philosophy in order to see what dangers, moral implications, and alternatives might emerge.

The Dangers

The dangers of the rationalism of educational technology can be seen in at least three areas (Nichols, 1987). Physically, production of the hardware we buy, for instance, uses up the earth's resources, creates toxic by-products, and threatens the earth and human life. Socially, educational technology is threatening because it encourages poverty and social dislocation. Psychologically, our technology encourages disintegration of the self.

By "psychologically," I mean the self beyond the merely rational. Existential philosophy has come close to describing the self I mean, especially in that it has been the question of "a truth for man that is more than a truth of the intellect" (Barrett, 1958, p. 249). In *Death of the Soul*, Barrett (1986) characterizes the self as a passionate, persistent, *fully* conscious, moral identity and not simply, as described by some forms of rationalism, "some inert mental stuff or amalgam of perceptions" (p. 123).

Of the dangers of such rationalism, he says, "The specialization of the modern mind is in the interests of efficiency: but this pursuit of efficiency can lead to compartmentalization of mind and the consequent fragmentation of the human person" (p. 111).

In the foregoing sense, technological equity is a question of equality, or wholeness, of the self rather than a question of equal access.

It's Dangerous, But Is It Wrong?

To propose that the rationalism of educational technology is dangerous is one thing, but to say it is wrong is something else. I want to contend, however, that a predominant rationalism is wrong in its danger and that there exists a moral principle against which we might make judgments about our educational technology.

A version of Existentialism may help to identify that principle. Most Existentialists believe that human being is the whole of individual existence, including the irrational as well as the rational. Barrett (1978) would call this the whole of consciousness and says, "Consciousness as the performer of intentional [rational] acts is thus intelligible only on the basis of our being in

the world. It would be without roots or sense otherwise" (p. 145). The attempt to understand the whole of existence is a helpful rebuke to the danger of self disintegration. In all its dealings with death and nothingness, Existentialism also can help us to accept that discrete aspects of existence are not perfect; technological manifestations of our rationality have the power to destroy existence. Further, we must let existence reveal itself (Heidegger, 1977) in order to make progress toward an authentic self. A prevalent, controlling rationalism will only bring greater danger.

However, much Existentialism has had problems. (See Barrett, 1958.) It has focused on the individual and, so, is not anchored in the concrete existence of community, earth, or faith. Facing the great nothingness without community or faith may have caused the psychotic disintegration that overcame Nietzche. Also, it hasn't been able to reconcile the rational with the irrational. Sartre, for instance, turns out to be a Cartesian rationalist who avoids truth beyond the intellect by developing his "will to action," a controlling behavior. Perhaps most seriously, an Existentialist statement of morality has been difficult to conceive (A notable exception is Barrett, 1986.) and/or has not been widely disseminated or accepted. For instance, Heidegger never wrote an ethics, when to reach the ethical would require a leap into "another region of existence" (Barrett, 1978, p. 252) beyond the rational.

In contrast, I don't see existence as a primarily individual experience. It's communal in that humans and non-human entities share space and affect one another. Further, humans share existence that is both innate and learned. For instance, sharing is found in that as babies we all try to eat to survive (innate), and as parents most of us oblige babies' attempts to survive (learned).

Reconciling the rational with the irrational is more difficult. How, for example, do I express my fully conscious, tacit, intuitive feelings or knowledge in a predominantly technical world--in writing, for instance? Once we have a predominant rational consciousness, how do we get beyond it?

This is a profoundly difficult problem for which I will only suggest here that one path of reconciliation is by way of seeing educational technology as a moral question, and by this path we might begin to move beyond a difficulty of most Existentialism--stating and sustaining an ethical position.

The position outlined above offers an explanation of existence, but in order to begin judging our technology against it, we must go a step farther and say what is good about about this existence. Most Existentialists would say that existence or being just *is*. No judgments are levied. However, I propose the quite simple principle that Existence Is Good. That is, the whole of existence is moral, including the rational and irrational, the life and death, the human and non-human, the individual and the communal, the controlling and the letting go.

Now the phrase "the whole of existence" and the pairs of terms that characterize it are meant to signify a balance. or to repeat an earlier phrase, a "peaceful coexistence." And as long as these aspects of existence are allowed to be in balance with one another, existence is good, there is a moral condition. Conversely, let any of the discrete aspects predominate and there is immorality.

Some of our educational technology is in opposition to the balance of existence as I've characterized it. Through educational technology we impose and seek a predominantly rational view of learning and instruction. We strive for perfection, while our technology is only a discrete part of existence and cannot be perfect. We seek controlling rather than passive letting go. On at least these counts, then, our technology encourages an imbalance in existence. To this degree, our educational technology is not good.

In sum, in that they threaten us physically and socially, and so stop or impede existence, some forms of educational technology are, at best, morally suspect. To the extent that they seek a fully rational existence rather than a full existence, they may be morally indefensible.

Recommendations

Among the many suggestions that could be made if these conclusions have merit, I will make just two.

First, educational technology ought to be examined as a moral issue. Second, a statement of ethics, perhaps reflecting the position I have taken here, probably is needed. Producing such a statement runs the risk of reducing morals and ethics to a mere technicality. However, if it can be used more as guidance than as law, such a statement might be worthwhile. In that spirit, here are some possible guidelines for educational technology.

1. Seek to understand the full implications--negative, positive and otherwise--of educational technology.

2. Seek less to control learning than to allow it. This applies especially to instructional design, where students should have a say in this decision-making process.

3. Seek learning in all its aspects. We should look for and allow the mental, physical, and, shall we say, spiritual aspects of humans.

Conclusion

To conclude that educational technology may be morally indefensible is not to say that it is totally immoral, for that would be to claim that humans are always immoral. We have not completely lost our self, though the likes of human chemical and genetic engineering may lead us to full control and, perhaps, to the "death of the soul."

Educational technology is a moral issue, and I see evidence that others view it that way and are attempting to act accordingly. There are, for instance, symposia about the ethical nature of educational technology. And I believe these efforts come about through conscience and because existence *is* good. As a kind of evidence, I would ask if my claim that a predominantly rational-technical existence is dangerous has piqued your conscience.

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